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NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE AND THE POWER OF IMAGINATION

Robert E. Bieder

HJEAS

Years ago I was being considered for a position at what was then called the Center for the History of the American Indian at the Newberry Library in Chicago. But before it could be offered I had to have an interview and be approved by somebody named D'Arcy McNickle. I, of course, recognized the name; I had come across it in my readings in ethnology and history. I knew also that he was a historian of Cree descent and a member of the Flathead tribe and the author of several novels including *The Surrounded* and *Wind from an Enemy Sky*, but I had never met him.

With some anxiety and trepidation, I flew from Chicago to Alburquerque for my interview. D'Arcy met me at the airport and he drove me to his home in the city's Old Town. Within the hour, I found myself walking with D'Arcy among the spring flowers on West Mesa. It was an unusual interview as interviews go. We strolled, we sat on rocks, we talked. He did not seek the usual information of a job interview, for example, where had I worked before, why did I leave, what was I doing during those time gaps in my résumé. Instead he asked me for stories; he told me stories. We spent the afternoon walking and talking, talking about flowers, about former Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier, about building houses, about southern France and making salads. There were silences too. Silences when we studied how the wind pulled at the flowers, when we watched how the clouds bled in the sunset, when we watched a mouse run from one plant to another, when we watched a hawk float on the air currents. D'Arcy told me stories of his past. He told me stories of the future. In the end, he gave me the job because he liked my stories better than those of my competitors.

This was the beginning of my relationship with D'Arcy. As my boss, he would often come to Chicago to check up on things. During those visits we would invariable end up at his hotel, the Drake, and over dinner he would tell me stories that slid forward and backwards in time. Stories of his past where he imagined "what if . . . ?" Stories where dreams and guilts got mixed up and remained like dried beans rattling in the wind resonating over time. D'Arcy was a storyteller and from him I learned more than the importance of stories; I learned the importance of words and the significance of silence. I learned how to listen. I learned how to think about stories.

What I would like to do here is to briefly identify certain devices and themes in contemporary Indian storytelling or "talk-stories." I would like to stress the importance of the trickster figure and note the significance of community and identity as themes in American Indian

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literature. These themes are and continue to be important in the works of the earlier generation of Indian writers, but here I want to note how these themes are echoed in the works of some of the more recent writers. More particularly, the works of Craig Womack, a Creek; Patricia Riley, a Cherokee; Kimberly Blaeser, an Ojibwa; Andrew Connors, an Ojibwa; Tom King, a Cherokee; and Harvest Moon Eyes, a Cherokee.

Several years ago, the Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday remarked, "we are what we imagine. The worst that can befall us is to go unimagined" ("Man" 55). Story telling is rooted in imagination and in the words and silences that give expression to that imagination. For America's tribal people, and perhaps for tribal people elsewhere, the meaning of these words and silences are buried in the shadows and nuances of tribal memory and ceremonies. Story telling calls them forth again, reworks them and in so doing makes the people's survival possible. It is this remaking of the old stories that is the value of story telling for American Indians. Anthropologist Michael M. J. Fisher in his article "Ethnicity and the Arts of Memory" arrives at a similiar conclusion. "Amerindian autobiographies and autobiographical fiction and poetry are among the most sophisticated exemplars of the use of ironic humor as a survival skill, a tool for acknowledging complexity, a means of exposing or subverting oppressive hegemonic ideologies, and an art for affirming life in the face of objective troubles" (224).

One of the favorite figures in American Indian storytelling is trickster and his/her (trickster is both sexed and sexless) wild and unpredictable escapades. Trickster delights in transgressing the rules of society by turning the rules upside down. This is the favorite occupation of trickster. A culture hero, he/she appears in the oral tales of many tribes as Coyote, Raven, Spider, Blue Jay, Dragonfly, Raccoon, Hare, Wolverine, or given names like Old Man Coyote, Nanabozho, Manabozho, Nanabush, or Saynday. He/she might be compared to the Monkey King of China, or the Signifying Monkey or Esu in African oral tales (Blaeser, "Trickster" 25; Vizenor, "Trickster Discourse" 34; Vecsey 84-104; Marriott and Rachlin 173-77; Boas 472-74; Radin xxiii).

It is impossible to really define trickster. Many have tried (Blaeser, *Gerald Vizenor* 137-47). The folklorist, Stith Thompson in his *Tales of the North American Indians*, first published in 1929, saw trickster as an "incongruous feature" in Indian tales; part buffon and part culture hero. "In one set of tales, . . . Manabozho is a beneficent being, bringing culture and light to his people, in another, he is the incarnation of greediness, lust, cruelty, and stupidity" (xviii). Thompson has trouble not only in describing trickster but also in deciphering what or how the narrator of these tales sees trickster. "Sometimes [trickster] the buffon is a human being, but more often he is an animal endowed with human characteristics. Usually it is quite imposssible to tell whether animal or person is in the mind to the narrator. The distinction is never very clear" (xviii). Thompson was an early recorder and critic of American Indian tales and his interpretation of them was "bookish" and without benefit of contact with tribal peoples. Yet many academics since then have had

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little success in capturing in words the essence or the ambiguity of the trickster figure. Academics have placed trickster at Creation; one with the First People who were here before humans were placed on earth. Trickster, able to change shape and sex at will, is neither animal, man or god but is a composite of all three.

Here I thought it might be useful to include a trickster story so that you might see better one face of trickster. This story is adapted from a Sioux account entitled "Coyote and the Stranger" (Blaeser, "Trickster" 27).

Coyote was going along trotting down the desert way when he saw the dust of a horse and rider.

White man coming and look at that fancy rig on him!

Well, old Coyote was a shape shifter, of course. In no time, he had taken manshape, looking just like a poor man of the people, dark skin, black hair. Only the eyes were odd, the mocking green eyes of the trickster.

Did the stranger know him by those eyes? Maybe. For the man pointed right at Coyote and said, "Heard there's someone around here who fancies himself a cheater. Someone by the name of Coyote."

Cheater! Coyote thought angrily. A fine name for someone who set the sun in the sky! "Might be," he answered smoothly, bland of face. But behind the blank mask, his busy mind was plotting.

"Ha, you're Coyote, I know it!" shouted the stranger, "but I'm a better cheater than you. Ain't a man alive who can out-trick me, surely not some worn-out Indian! Come on, try me!"

Now, Coyote thought, here was a pretty bird, just asking to be plucked! Coyote grinned, lazily and replied, "The day's too warm."

"Try me! Try to cheat me!" exclaimed the stranger.

"No. The sun's too hot," repeated Coyote.

"You're afraid! You're scared to have a cheating match with me," laughed the stranger.

Coyote sighed. "Trouble is, I left my cheating medicine back home."

"Well, go get it," exclaimed the stranger impatiently.

"It's too far, I'm too tired. You want a cheating match, better wait till another day. Or lend me your horse so I can get there and back again," sighed Coyote.

The stranger thought that one over for just a minute. But so eager was he to show what a mighty trickster he was he jumped down from the saddle. But Coyote slyly moved upwind of the horse. And the horse, smelling the not-human scent of Coyote, moved back, eyes rolling, ears twitching.

"He's scared of me because I don't have a white man's hat," Coyote said. "Let me borrow yours."

"Here take it," said the stranger whipping it off, "go get your

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cheating medicine!"

But Coyote continued to stand upwind and, of course, the horse still backed away. Coyote shrugged. "He's scared of me because I don't wear white man's clothes. Guess our match is off."

But the stanger was so eager to prove himself, he peeled out of his fancy shirt and pants and boots without a moment's thought. "Here, try them," he said handing them to Coyote.

Coyote slid into the stranger's clothes, leaving the stranger in only his underwear. With the stranger's hat on his head, Coyote moved downwind. Unable to scent him, the horse stood still. Coyote mounted and urged the horse into a trot. But then, safely out of reach, old Coyote reined in the horse, looked back at the denuded man, and grinned.

"Well, stranger," he called, "Are you content? Learned your lesson?"

"Lesson? What are you talking about?"

"Look down at yourself, stranger. No clothes, no horse. Look down and admit: No man living can trick Coyote!"

With a wave of his hand, Coyote rode away.

For tribal people, trickster is problematic. Ojibwa writer, Kimberly Blaeser notes that "trickster is neither solely good, nor solely bad; neither completely wise, nor only foolish; he is sometimes the wily perpetrator of tricks, sometimes the buffon who falls victim to his own pride; sometimes the tribal benefactor, and sometimes the bungler who spoils some aspect of the world for man" ("Trickster" 26). Trickster is capable of anything. According to another Ojibwa writer, Gerald Vizenor, "Tricksters are real in stories but not in the flesh. Tricksters are not blood or material; they are imagination. . . . Humans are not tricksters but tricksters can be human. . . . Tricksters liberate the mind, and they do so in language games. . . . Tricksters have become anthropologists but no anthropologist has ever understood a trickster" ("Trickster Discourse" 35). By now, you see trickster is indeed a remarkable "fellow" with a sense of humor, "someone" who mocks convention, "someone" who is so vain and confident of his/her powers that he/she cannot refuse a game of chance.

If trickster exists in the tribal imagination, he/she also is a deconstructive and elusive force, subverting and disrupting any attempts at representation. Just when trickster seems within our grasp, he/she slips away only to appear again another day to test our skills. Like the tribal community, trickster survives. The ability to turn language to his/her own purpose, to outwit and survive despite the odds is one of the characteristics that endears trickster to tribal people whose survival has often seemed in doubt.

Why does trickster exist, how did he come into being? One might ask why does humor exist and how did it come into being? Some have tried, however, to discover a social function in the tales where trickster

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creates delightful chaos. Ojibwa writer, Blaeser finds the tales useful for teaching. Trickster teaches through example. "Trickster tales frequently work to enlighten the audience to their own flaws or to caution against certain actions by exposing the ludicrousness of trickster's actions" (Trickster 28). In this way trickster serves to reinforce the normative rules of society. But even here, trickster defies catagorization. There are stories, Blaeser reminds us, where trickster is a disruptive agent and questions the status quo; questions our complacency. Often through devastating logic, trickster wreaks havoc on our assumptions about how the world works, or ought to work. Blaeser also sees trickster tales as an emotional release. Here trickster, as in a carnivalesque guise, "free-wheels his way through life, blatantly transgressing rules, customs and good sense, [and] all those touched by the stories enjoy an imaginative escape themselves from the enforced structures of society" ("Trickster" 29). Finally, Blaeser sees trickster as the great social leveller. By poking fun at the status quo, and the pompous in society, trickster tales "reveal the artificial nature of divisons, of social structure, the arbitrary and subjective nature of many of our established perceptions. We realize there is no final, ultimate answer, no infallibility that we can blindly accept and follow" (29). Trickster gives us laughter. Trickster awakens us to the future of possibility and in that charts our survival.

Trickster is always moving. Trickster stories begin "Coyote was going along. . . ." and thus the tale begins. And so trickster lopes his way through much of current Indian literature. Trickster is there in Thomas King's novel *Green Grass, Running Water* where he, as coyote, can not seem to get right the story of creation.

Trickster is also in Vizenor's short story "The Moccasin Game" and, indeed, trickster seems to wander through Vizenor's stories at will. For example, trickster is in Vizenor's novel *Griever: An American Monkey King in China*, in *The Trickster of Liberty: Tribal Heirs to a Wild Baronage*, in *Hotline Healers*, in *Landfill Meditation,* and again in *The Darkness of Saint Louis Bearheart*. In Vizenor's *Wordarrows: Indians and Whites in the New Fur Trade*, trickster assumes multiple identities as Clement Beaulieu, as Mother Earth Man, and as Ishmael of the Slow-Food Tricksters. As a postmodernist and against any kind of representation, Vizenor likes trickster since trickster defies classification.

Probably Vizenor's consummate trickster is Harold Sinseer, (a character who is anything but sincere), who in the play/film "Harold of Orange," convinces a philanthropic foundation board to provide grants to Minnesota Ojibwa to grow oranges and coffee beans in northern Minnesota (Vizenor, *Shadow Distance* 297-333). Trickster also has a major role in Vizenor's novel *The Hiers of Columbus* where it is revealed that Columbus is really a Mayan Indian who (re)discovers America on a trip back to his homeland. Perhaps Vizenor is a trickster himself—turning the tables on history, playing with words in the tradition of good story telling, separating words from their referents and forcing them to carry the burdens of new meanings.

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But I, like trickster, must move on to another theme that is important in contemporary Indian writing and that is the sense of community. In fact, if trickster helps the community to survive, trickster is also a creation of the community. Trickster's existence and humor depends upon the shared experience, the shared imagination of the community. The humor inherent in many of trickster's escapades is a product of community imagination and has a salubrious effect on the community. As Fisher notes, "humor is a critical component of the healing talk-stories that reestablish connection to the past, to the cosmos, and to the present" (227).

Several years ago, anthropologist Nancy Lurie suggested that anthropologists and historians in their attempts to understand the Indian past, may be researching the wrong questions. Rather than looking into Indian ceremonies and cultural survivals for the key to understanding Indians, anthropologists should be looking at how Indians preserved their sense of community (187-208).

Years ago I tried to convince a Mohawk friend from upstate New York, to join me at the University of New Mexico. We had both grown up in New York and both had attended college there until I decided to transfer to the University of New Mexico. He thought about it for a while but then said no. He said he would miss the lakes and forests of the Adirondack Mountains. More importantly though, he could not conceive of wrenching himself away from the community that defined his identity.

A similar situation occurred when I taught in Iowa where I had a Mesquakie student named Ray Young Bear, who would later become a noted poet. He told me he had received a scholarship to a university in California. He tried California for a year but returned to his home and reservation in Iowa. He told me California did not feel right. It was not home, he could not write, there were no connections. He needed his community for imagining, for providing that sense of place where medicine or power resided. His poems are about the tribal people in his world and their relationship to the land upon which they live. For Young Bear, as for many other Indians, community is more than a collection of kinship networks and local institutions, it also includes the land, a defined mental space, that is the center of life that includes plants, animals and spirits. It is a place of dreaming where the shadows of memory and reality fuse.

It is this awareness of community, the reservation and larger kinship world that symbolizes home and belonging, that has sustained tribal people and resonates in much of contemporary Indian literature. This forms the subject of several works that focus on individuals lost to their community but who, through a slow and painful process, eventually complete their physical and spiritual return. Here I think first of N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* or his *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, but I also remember Leslie Silko's *Ceremony,* D'Arcy McNickle's *The Surrounded*, and Michael Dorris's *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water.* Community, however, is also foregrounded in the writings of a younger generation of writers. In the short story "The Day the Crows Stopped

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Talking" by Harvest Moon Eyes, where the community is about to be destroyed by developers who seek to build a shopping plaza and have bribed tribal leaders for the land; or the short story by Kimberly Blaeser, "From Aboard the Night Train," where the narrator searches for both identity and community in a return back to the reservation; or Andrews Connors's short story "Avian Messiah and Mistress Media," concerned with the loss of community and the search for something to take its place.

Finding and sustaining community is also related to my third theme, maintaining cultural and personal identity; a difficult task in an increasingly multicultural world. In the United States where more than half of the Indians live in cities, the task of maintaining connections with the tribal or reservation community is difficult. Urban life-style all too often leads one to marry other-tribal people or non-Indians producing individuals who are culturally adrift. But identity can also be problematical for cross-blood individuals even on reservations. Identity crisis is a major theme in the recent literature of American Indian authors who often share these same dilemmas with their characters. This search for identity is the subject of Craig Womack's short story, "Lucy, Oklahoma, 1911," where a young girl struggles to make sense of her cross-blood predicament and learn who she is. A similar situation is presented in Patricia Riley's short story, "The Adventures of an Indian Princess," where we learn that cultural genocide is alive and well, and in Harvest Moon Eyes's short story, "The Day the Crows Stopped Talking," where Sky, a cross-blood, is marginalized in a reservation community.

In this brief essay, I have sought to touch on three aspects that I think are important in American Indian literature and point out how these themes continue in the works of a new generation of writers who are not extensively known. This does not mean that these are the only aspects or themes that are worth considering. Nor have I had the time to delve into the cultural implications of these themes or suggest caution about cross-cultural reading and interpreting. Yet the task of reading American Indian literature—despite the cultural difficulties encountered—is worthwhile, not only for the beauties revealed in another way of seeing the world, but, also in learning more about our world and ourselves. American Indian literature both recalls the past and speaks to the present "as the healing medicine not only for Indians but for Americans and modern folk at large" (Fisher 224).

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